

Analyzing Literature: Critical Analysis

"My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel--it is, before all, to make you see."

--Joseph Conrad, Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*

It is the task of critical readers to see as clearly as possible what the creative writer is trying to show them. It is the task of critical writers to show their readers as clearly as possible what they have seen. It is not usually their task to evaluate (i.e., decide whether a work is good or bad). This is the task of the reviewer.

Elements of a Critical Essay

Accuracy: You must be sure that you understand the basic, literal meaning of the text. Check all your references to the text (whether in the form of quotations or paraphrases) to make sure that you have not misread it or read into things that you would like to believe are there.

Self-Consistency: Your reading must not contradict itself, either directly or by implication.

Plausibility: This feature is one of the hardest to assess (ideas always look plausible to their inventors), but it is also the most important. It is easy to produce a reading that explains a few carefully chosen aspects of the text, but it must not be contradicted by other aspects of the text. If you develop an argument that a work shows the hazards of ambition and the work contains a character who seems to be rewarded for ambition, you must explain the contradiction or modify your theory. It is this element of plausibility that separates a good interpretation (which may or may not be believed by everyone) from a bad one, which will convince nobody but its inventor.

Support from the text: This is an important feature of plausibility. Back up statements by citing or quoting specific parts of the text. If you say, for example, that a character has changed by the end of the story, explain what it is in the story that makes you feel that way.

Explication of text: Just as general statements should be backed up by specific references to the text, all references to the text should be accompanied by explanations of their significance. Often these explanations are most effective after rather than before the reference.

Effective use of quotations: One of the best ways to use a quotation is to use it to illustrate a general statement. Here's an example of a quotation used in this way: Charlie blames his moral collapse of three years ago on the times: "I worked hard for ten years, you know--until I got luck on the market, like so many people" (p.329). Never drop in quotations without indicating their significance. Don't make the reader say, "So what?"

Balance: An essay can focus deliberately on one aspect of a work; entire essays have been written on the significance of Marlow's posture in *Heart of Darkness*. An essay that purports to be a general discussion of a work should pay attention to major themes and central incidents. Avoid building an entire argument around a minor aspect of the work unless you can show how it sheds light on the whole.

Sound Mechanics: Of course, all writing should be clear and correct. Be particularly careful of quotation format (see any good writing handbook for details). It is a convention that events in a literary work are described in the present tense.

Organizing a Critical Essay

The most obvious structure for a critical essay is a "support" structure in which you state what you think a work is "about" and then prove it. This structure often works, but it may have two disadvantages:

1. An attempt to boil a work down to a one-sentence "message" may (depending on the work) be too limiting. Consider, for instance, *Aesop's Fables* and *Light in August*.
2. Like any support structure, this structure may leave you with no way to conclude except by repeating your opening.

If you are having trouble structuring a critical essay, try this (and reject it if it doesn't seem to be working):

1. Open with a discussion of the theme in the most general possible way, by discussing the general area (or areas) that the author explores: ambition, the psychology of murder, stereotyping, the American dream, sin and redemption, etc. Point out how this theme fits with the basic plot or situation of the work. Your assignment may well help you do some of this work. If you are asked, for instance, to "Discuss the theme of evil in *Light in August*," your general direction is prescribed.
2. Do a close reading to show how this theme is brought out. Go systematically through the work (usually, but not necessarily, in the order written) and pick out specific incidents, images and statements that seem to you to be important. Explain their significance. Paraphrase or quote only enough of the work to ensure that your reader knows what you are talking about.
3. Conclude by pointing out, either briefly or in detail, how some of these specific points tie together into a more specific theme, group of themes, or even a specific "message." You will probably be in a better position to tell the reader something informative after they have seen in detail how you see the work.

Hint: If you aren't sure what you think a work is all about, try doing the close reading first. You may discover significance as you go along. But be prepared to do quite a bit of rewriting on such stabs in the dark.

Titles

Try to find a specific title that suggests what you have found significant in the work. If you can't find a specific title, it may indicate that your essay is not very specific.

"The Theme of Evil in *Light in August*" or "Characterization in *A Jest of God*" tells the reader more than, say, "An Essay on *Heart of Darkness*."

Additional Suggestions

When trying to decide what is significant in a work of literature, some of the following may provide clues:

1. Repeated images, actions, motifs, incidents, or turns of phrase.
2. Philosophical statements by the author or characters (which may or may not echo the sentiments of the author).

3. Images that may have universal symbolic value (darkness and light, the earth, religious images, etc.) Check your interpretation against the rest of the text to see if it holds water. Be prepared for complex symbolism. Does darkness suggest evil? death? the womb (i.e., safety)? ignorance? all of the above? none of the above?

Don't worry if you can't nail everything down. Label educated guesses as such (as long as you have some reason for what you say) and don't be ashamed of them. Be guided by this general rule: the interpretation that is most likely to be useful and plausible is the one that fits best with the rest of the text.

Avoid Using Secondary Sources (unless required to do so)

In literary criticism, the work that you are directly analyzing is called the primary source, and any other books or articles about that work are called secondary sources. You can use these books to get ideas. If you do, you must document not only quotations from those books, but also any ideas you get from them. Failure to do so constitutes [plagiarism](#), which is a serious academic offence. If you do borrow an idea, one way to integrate it is use the "x says that..." formula, as in the following example:

Baldwin says that pilgrimage in "The Canterbury Tales" is symbolic of Man's pilgrimage to Heaven. I do not believe it is accidental that this pilgrimage is led by the noble knight (15).

Thus you can use Baldwin's original idea and expand on it with your own ideas (in this case by discussing how the Knight fits the symbolic pattern suggested by Baldwin). In the example above, the "15" refers to the page number from Baldwin. Be sure to also include a list of works cited at the end of your paper. Use MLA style to document your reference to Baldwin.

Occasionally, you may be so overwhelmed by the competing ideas of the critics that you will be unable to sort your ideas from theirs. Unless your assignment specifically calls for you to use secondary sources, it is usually best not to read secondary sources. Your own ideas are more important.

The Purpose of Analyzing Literature

Few English students will become literary scholars (and fewer will be employed as such). But writing critical essays has at least three purposes, two pragmatic and one genuinely useful:

1. To demonstrate your mastery of the skill that the course is intended to teach, which is to be able to read profound works insightfully,
2. To demonstrate your general writing ability, and
3. To improve your ability to read deeply. All writing is a process of discovery; writing about literature, because it forces one to look closely at a work and think deeply about it, provides an understanding of how literature functions, an understanding which may not be obtained from merely reading literature.